

# Who Made That? ( **RAT DISTORTION PEDAL** )

By **PAGAN KENNEDY**

"Yes, there were literally rats down there," says Scott Burnham, who in the mid-'70s hunkered down in a basement in Kalamazoo, Mich., in search of a new sound for garage bands. At the time, Burnham worked as Hippie in Charge of Technology — his official title — for a manufacturer of electric-guitar cables and accessories called Pro Co Sound. While customers wandered around the company's first-floor showroom, Burnham tinkered below. "I had started thinking about what would make a killer distortion pedal," he says.

Distortion pedals have been around since the 1960s; they scramble the signal from an electrical instrument and make it sound "fuzzier." This is what adds growl to the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." Burnham wanted to create a distortion pedal that would capture the essence of stadium rock — the buzz of an amp cranked to teeth-rattling decibels.

One day, as he was soldering parts to create a distortion machine, he picked up the wrong resistor and attached it to his circuit board. "Woooooo," Burnham howled, imitating the sound that the rig made. "I thought, This is something I have never heard." The shriek was far weirder than the fuzz effect he'd been trying to achieve, and he quickly built it into a pedal he named the Rat.

By the 1980s, Pro Co was shipping tens of thousands of Rats every year. "The biggest thrill was in 1985, when I saw a picture of Jeff Beck using my pedal," Burnham says. Rat pedals now populate music studios all around the world. "I never had children," he says, "so my kids are those black boxes out there." ♦



## RATTLE MEETS ROAR

Gordon Raphael, a musician and music producer, has worked with the Strokes, Regina Spektor and many others.

**When you produced the Strokes' first two albums, did they ask you for a particular sound?** Yeah. They said, "We want to sound like a band where you go into the future and find a forgotten

recording of the distant past."

**How did distortion help you create that sound?** Each boy in the band had a Jekyll & Hyde distortion pedal, but most of the time the amps were creating the distortion. And I applied distortion to the drums and the singing. For three or four years,

everybody wanted that sound.

**What were your fuzz influences?** In the '90s, I was struck with a band called Skinny Puppy. All their vocals were destroyed with distortion. When Julian Casabiancas of the Strokes was looking for a vocal sound, I showed him this

sound like nuclear devastation. He said "That's terrible. Can you just give me a sound like worn bluejeans?"

**So distortion can give you anything, from old blue jeans to a hair shirt?** Yeah, and sometimes you want your own personal nuclear device.

## RAT PACK

These rock heroes created fuzzed-out anthems by stomping on a Rat pedal.



Joe Perry  
Aerosmith



David Gilmour  
Pink Floyd



Kurt Cobain  
Nirvana



Jeff Beck



Thom Yorke  
Radiohead

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENS MORTENSEN